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Unfolding
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TAIWAN IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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Taiwan in Comparative Perspective is a new and unique eJournal that contextualizes the processes of globalisation through interdisciplinary studies that use Taiwan as a point of comparison. The primary aim of the eJournal is to promote grounded, critical and contextualized analysis of cultural, political, economic and societal change by using modern Taiwan as a point of comparison.

In addition, the eJournal seeks to use the study of Taiwan as a fulcrum for discussing theoretical and methodological questions pertinent not only to study in/of Taiwan but to the study of cultures and societies more generally. Thereby the rationale of *Taiwan in Comparative Perspective* is to act as a forum and catalyst for the development of new theoretical and methodological positions and perspectives generated via critical scrutiny of the particular experience of Taiwan in an increasingly unstable and fragmented world.

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Taiwan in Comparative Perspective

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Book Reviews

Margaret Hillenbrand (2007) *Literature, Modernity, and the Practice of Resistance: Japanese and Taiwanese Fiction, 1960-1990*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 357pp, ISBN 978-9-0041-5478-0

Western scholarship on East Asian literature tends to fall into two categories: nation-specific literary studies that focus on literature that is written in a single, 'national' language, and comparative studies that tend to examine a given East Asian national literature in conjunction with that of Western literatures, particularly English, French, or German. There may be some exceptions to this rule, but, as Margaret Hillenbrand writes in her pioneering treatment of East Asian literature as an 'intra-regional' phenomenon, they are hard to find, and the intellectual terrain is deeply impoverished as a result. Hillenbrand bills her book as "the first extended attempt to apply notions of an intra-regional episteme to the discipline of contemporary East Asian comparative literature" (299) (in English, at least), and it is difficult to argue with her. Her study focuses on contemporary literary events in Taiwan and Japan and, undeniably, there is no other book thus far in English that does that. In addition to her overarching analysis of these contemporary literary phenomena, Hillenbrand makes no bones about her critique both of 'Eurocentric' comparative literature, which she argues subjugates the simple case studies of East Asian literature to universal theories that never venture beyond the theory/application paradigm, and Sinological or Japanological approaches, which remain ensconced within the tight confines of the nation-state. She also observes that other academic fields, such as political science, history, and sociology, have already tended toward more regionalist models; it is literary studies that remains within the 'sealed off' (15) spaces of the nation-state. Thus, her book, if the argument stands the test of scrutiny (and I believe with some qualifications it does), is a challenge to conventional approaches as we know and practice them.

By asserting that geographical parameters transcend those typical of a study narrowly focused on Chinese or Japanese literature, Hillenbrand promises to chart a new 'porous' cultural field (16) which exhibits an easy commerce of cultural artifacts such as music, film, and, indeed, literature across borders. She also sees the East Asian crescent as emblematic of some general historical trends, the most important of which is the post-war emergence of economic prowess that constitutes Japan, Taiwan, and Korea. But unlike contemporary thinkers such as Tu Wei-ming, who have argued the beneficial sides of a modernity informed by what he terms New Confucianism, the results of Hillenbrand's research indicate that contemporary intellectuals in Japan and Taiwan generally cast a jaundiced eye upon this new-found wealth and

consumerism in their societies. The texts she deals with tend to be 'dystopian' (54) visions of highly suspect state orthodoxies. The authors generally disparage what they consider overbearing and self-perpetuating regimes that do not necessarily have the best interests of ordinary individuals at heart. Furthermore, she identifies a broad resentment toward sinocentrism in East Asia that has had the ironic effect of a backlash leading to such things as the search for a Taiwanese identity, resistance to Kuomintang (KMT) efforts at re-Sinicization (80), the Japanese 'obsession' with cultural purity (74), and a 'natural' affinity developing between Japan and Taiwan. She takes the period of roughly 1960-1990 for her historical frame, a time during which the 'Pax Americana' (a period of relative peace under the umbrella of US military and diplomatic protection) reigned high and economic development burned more furiously with each passing year. The 30-year span is a manageable 'generational' delimitation, she argues, and the cut-off date of 1990 coincides fairly closely with the 'great divide' (a term borrowed from Yvonne Chang) caused by the 1987 lifting of martial law in Taiwan and the bursting of the Japanese economic bubble and defeat of the country's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in the early 1990s.

Three themes structure the more substantive chapters of Hillenbrand's book: US geopolitical hegemony, the breakdown of traditional kinship patterns, and the emergence of commodified society. In addition, she perceives two leitmotifs – or tropes, as she occasionally calls them – pervading all the works under consideration: the image of the city and the fascination with sexuality. The city becomes, in some cases, more than a mere *tableau* on which social issues are worked out among characters, but a character itself in the texts. Sexuality, the second trope, is seldom portrayed in alluring ways. What is most remarkable about human relations, she shows, is the profound lack of affect, the disavowal of reproductive sexuality, the rarity of desire, and the combination, in some cases, of sexuality with suffering, violence and death that is prevalent in different ways in a broad range of texts. The selection of authors and texts is reasonably broad: in addition to the passing mention of two dozen major authors, Hillenbrand centers her treatment on the analysis of twelve authors, six each from Japan and from Taiwan: Mishima Yukio, Nosaka Akiyuki, Oe Kenzaburo, Murakami Ryu, Murakami Haruki, Yoshimoto Banana, Bai Xianyong, Wang Wenxing, Huang Chunming, Wang Zhenhe, Li Ang, and Zhu Tianwen. Hillenbrand takes pains to note that this group of authors is not monolithic and that they are sufficiently diverse and distinguishable from one another in a variety of ways, so that they form a useful cross-section of literary expression during the period under discussion. The Japanese authors do in fact vary greatly in age, and the authors from Taiwan are ethnically diverse (ie. *benshengren* 'native Taiwanese' and *waishengren* 'mainlanders' are both represented), but she does not believe there is as large a generational gap between the Taiwanese authors. I would tend to disagree with that.

The articulation of her approach and the outline of the scope of her inquiry occupy fully the first third of the book. This is followed by three chapters which each delve into the specific investigation of a few select literary works. These chapters are, respectively, 'Rest and Recreation in the City', 'Discord at Home: The Ruptured Family in Postwar Fiction', and 'Sex and the City: Commodities of Choice'. A short conclusion ends the book. Chapter Two ('Rest and Recreation')

looks at five works that use perversions of sexuality, themes of miscegenation, and various forms of fetishization to subject the US's relationship with East Asian client states to harsh scrutiny. Marukami Ryu's narratives of 'base-town fiction', for example, suggest how someone young and impressionable who has grown up in such an environment would naturally acquire a rather perverted view of relations with the opposite sex, and, for that matter, the role of one's own country in connection to them. His work uses pimping as a metaphor for the geopolitics of post-war Japan and often contains sexual humbling of the Japanese male. The theme of interracial relations in Oe Kenzaburo's work allows for certain ironies, such as the physically overbearing American GI coaching the diminutive Japanese in the art of how to be a good patriot. Nosaka Akiyuki's depiction of Toshio, and his family's welcoming of the Higginses into their home, conceives of Tokyo as the body of a prostitute where the Higgins patriarch out-drinks and out-whores Toshio on his own turf. The elision of collusion with the semi-colonial power and pimping is echoed in the work of Huang Chunming who adds to it the fetishization of traditional Chinese culture in the attempt to attract American GIs on leave from the Vietnam War. Wang Zhenhe fixes his gaze on rural Taiwan and its harlotization, as the native characters are depicted as mouthing a *patois* of gibberish that includes Mandarin, English, and Taiwanese.

The third chapter relates for the reader several representations of the disintegrating family in East Asia and in the process examines how the city is set up as a *portmanteau* for this disintegration. In comparing texts from Japan and Taiwan, Hillenbrand is careful not to be too schematic or unreflective in the associations she makes. For instance, she notes that the background theme of Confucianism works to a point in Japan but cannot be taken to an extreme, given historical permutations. Nevertheless, she simultaneously demonstrates how the 'miracle' growth of Japan and Taiwan has an underside, which is the destructive effect that unchecked economic expansion has had on these two societies. In Wang Wenxing's short story 'Mother', for example, the entire affective bond between mother and son has evaporated and been replaced by an eroticization clearly unwelcome to the son. In Bai Xianyong's novel *The Outcasts* (better known in English as *Crystal Boys*), the city is portrayed as the dumping ground of modernity in which the characters search for new surrogate forms of kinship bonds. Bai Xianyong, she argues, has dealt a death blow to the KMT's attempt to revive traditionalism as a cohesive social bond. The image of the city in Murakami Ryu's bizarre 'Coin Locker Babies' is depicted as beyond anthropomorphic and in fact borderline supernatural. And Yoshimoto Banana's equally alienating text concocts an uncanny mixture of 'estranged otherness' and 'sugary optimism' (219). In the midst of all this urban *malaise*, the image of the child as victim is etched for the reader in a wide array of texts as a symbol of the nation's failings and thus operates both on the private and the public levels.

Hillenbrand's final chapter, on the commodification of sex in Japan and Taiwan's urban culture, provides copious examples of how escalating commodity fetishism and hyper-consumption is combined with an equally virulent depletion of normal libidinal forces. Sex in the city does exist, but not in the form one might care to imagine. Rather, it is more often than not portrayed as another dimension to the obsession with material products and their possession. She begins her discussion of texts in this chapter with an analysis of Mishima Yukio's 'The Million

Yen Rice Crackers'. Few authors can as poignantly dissect the *parvenus* or 'crossbreeds' (261) of consumer culture as Mishima. She continues her argument with an important re-reading of Murakami Haruki's *Dance, Dance, Dance*. Her interpretation is far more cognizant of the way the invasion of capital is inevitable and all-consuming than Murakami's critics have given him credit for. In fact, one of the valuable insights of Hillenbrand's book for someone who is not an expert on Japan is the way she reads against the established receptions of some of the most contemporary of Japanese authors such as the two Murakamis and Yoshimoto Banana. Sexuality itself has become nothing more than a commodity in these works, and Hillenbrand demonstrates this in her reading of Li Ang's *Dark Nights* and Zhu Tianwen's 'Red Rose is Paging You'. The former takes the dark metropolis of Taipei as its protagonist as much as any individual person; the latter exposes the vagaries of KTV (karaoke) and consumer culture, the ironic successors to soft totalitarianism. The majority of these works, with their tales of sexual trophies and the evaporation of desire, are deliberately de-eroticized.

Hillenbrand concludes her book by reminding us of its status as a path-breaking contribution, a work that moves beyond Western epistemological dominance. In quoting Rey Chow, one of her important forebears on this mission, Hillenbrand rightfully interrogates the presumption that nation-states with a national language are the only context in which one can set the parameters of a literary study. But she also distances herself from the authors under investigation and notes the most current trend of an all too complacent 'habituation' with a 'fixed ontology of opposition' (312). Authors will clearly need to continue to explore new terrains of dispossession if they are to hold her attention.

Literature, Modernity, and the Practice of Resistance is an important contribution to transnational studies of East Asian literatures and to the respective bodies of English-language scholarship on the literatures of Taiwan and Japan. Unquestionably, the nation-state has been an oppressive prism through which scholars have attempted to understand East Asian literatures, and comparative literature as a discipline to date has offered tepid relief from this predicament given the fact that little to none of it is, as Hillenbrand terms it, 'intra-regional'. Having said that, I am not convinced that those who focus on one nation or a group of authors or a movement within one national language, or a single author for that matter, are the avatars of myopia that Hillenbrand perhaps would have us believe. The example of Taiwan is *a propos* of this: it is perfectly legitimate, and I believe I do this in my own scholarship, to focus on one *milieu* and simultaneously raise serious questions about the notion of national identity. Indeed, one could assert, as I would, that the various regional Chinese languages themselves (which are often referred to as 'dialects', thus illustrating the intellectual anxiety directed at subregional cultures within a larger cultural Chinese umbrella) destabilize the notion of a monolithic national culture. One could work entirely within the Chinese discursive frame without embracing the view that China itself is a cohesive nation-state, let alone considering it in combination with Taiwan and Hong Kong. In other words, while Hillenbrand's general point that the insight one can garner through intra-regional comparative study is illuminating in unprecedented ways is well taken, it is not as absolutist as she would seem to argue. In fact, there are certain ways in which a focus on a single *milieu* can reveal things that the comparative study necessarily must gloss over. For

example, I am not an authority on Japanese fiction and thus cannot comment on it, but in the case of the Taiwanese examples, Hillenbrand fairly conventionally follows a canonical selection of authors. None of the authors she chooses to center on can be said to not be well-known in Western scholarship. To put it another way, the study could have been even more path-breaking had it highlighted some authors obscured by the forces that drive the canon – an author such as Ye Shitao or Zhong Zhaozheng would have sufficed. Conversely, the eschewal of national literatures, and particularly not pursuing connections with Chinese literature, can lead one to miss some important points. To wit, Hillenbrand quotes an interesting passage from Oe Kenzaburo depicting Japanese who mutely watch American GIs kill one of their own, but she fails to note that it is eerily similar to an infamous incident that Lu Xun relates in which Chinese watch the execution of compatriots by Japanese while staring blankly nearby (142). Finally, to take the radical extreme, the production of single author studies is also a field, especially in studies of contemporary Chinese literature, that generally has been avoided. To focus on such an inquiry would also help remove the shackles of intellectual discrimination placed upon East Asian cultural studies. For only with such detailed micro studies can we finally be placed on an equal footing with Western scholarship wherein single author treatments are taken for granted.

If we are to press Hillenbrand's thesis to its logical conclusion, then a book such as this cannot be complete without a section on contemporary Korean literature. Korean literature is the gaping absence in a study of this magnitude. Now, to be fair, how easy is it for a Western scholar to master not two but three East Asian languages? Not easy to be sure. By the same token, there would be far more intraregional comparative literary studies if it were easier or less time consuming for one to even learn two East Asian languages, leaving aside the possibility of mastering a regional Chinese language or two. Other disciplines are different, because most do not require the highly advanced linguistic proficiency that literary studies do, given the fact that our primary data are found precisely in language itself, and often the most challenging of linguistic media. In other words, I am persuaded by Hillenbrand that there are some serious problems with the ways Sinology and Japanology (not to mention comparative literature) are set up, problems that militate against the kind of expansive study that she has produced. But hopefully beginning with Hillenbrand and her generation there will be more support in the West for those who would like to pursue this sort of comparative research. This support must necessarily include efforts to train scholars in two or even three Asian languages. But this will never spell the end of scholars who focus solely on one East Asian tradition.

Finally, a few small points. It is wonderful that the book includes a Chinese character and *kanji* glossary. I was a bit mystified as to why there was no subject index. That does make it difficult to locate the occurrence of similar themes in different texts. I also wondered why the book title used the word 'resistance' when this was not actually addressed in the book. Resistance implies direct confrontation but the book presents the literary examples in it as enacting something more akin to subversion or impugment rather than resistance. I commend the attention that Hillenbrand pays to the theme of filial piety, especially in the texts from Taiwan. What I wish she had done, since her references are

generally so thorough, is to have cited the important articles by James Shu and me that address the theme of filial piety in the work of Wang Wenxing, an integral author to her study. Finally, I would like to point out that the book is extremely well written and articulate. Hillenbrand has a way of finding the precise word or expression for any situation. Structurally speaking, however, I found the vast first chapter that lays out the scope of the rest of the volume to be stultifying in length and shaped much more like a dissertation than a book. These criticisms aside, Margaret Hillenbrand has given us here a very important book that indeed is path breaking in its comparison of Taiwan and Japanese literary practice. In allowing us to examine the works of each tradition in conjunction with those of the other, it offers insights unavailable to us when we are solely immersed in one of those traditions. Her mastery of the material is impressive and her conclusions are enriching.

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